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AHASUERUS

A Race Tragedy

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copy*
J. P. Widney
Los Angeles
1915

(Private Edition)

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Los Angeles


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no. 1.

To My Homeless Kinfolk---Israel

Ahasuerus
A Race Tragedy

Ahasuerus

How many are the years, now come and gone,
Since that fell day! I scarce can count the tale.
It seems eternity! and yet, and yet
It seems as yesterday: and all the scene
Is fresh before my eyes:—

The sordid shop
Where at my endless task I sat and toiled:
The dull, sore drudgery for daily bread:
The heart grown dead within me in the toil:
The dusty way, without a blade of green:
The narrow glimpse of sky between the stones
That lifted up as bare, dead prison walls:
The ceaseless chatter of the bartering street:
The way worn camels slowly passing by
With load of desert balms, and frankincense,
And outland odors sweet that only made
The life of shut in toil more hopeless still,
And turned the heart within me to dull hate
Of all the world around.

A RACE TRAGEDY

Drawn in tense agony—but still no cry
Wrung from the close shut lips.

I only heard,
When howled the ribald mob about his feet—
For he was David's son, and gentle born :
This much I must say for him, though I hate
Because he brought not David's sword and crown—
When howled the mob, and when the Rabbi's taunt
In stinging bitterness was upward flung,
I heard no curse : only a weary look
As one sore tired, longing alone for rest,
Glad of the hour to lay the burden down :
And then a gentle voice in pleading tone,
"Father, forgive ! They know not what they do."
And then a woeful cry—and all was still.

Strange, how that voice yet haunts me. There was Love ;
And I had looked for hate.

And once his eye
A moment caught my eye. I only saw
A flood of pity. Strange ! and yet I hate,
Because we dreamed the dream it might be He,
The King the prophet spake of, come at last ;
And, lo, it was not : and we have no hope.
And then the years !—

A RACE TRAGEDY

The wife that by my side
Had toiled and borne—the wife grew old and died.
And children that had climbed upon my knee,
And laughed, and cried, they too grew old and died;
And I lived on. The house was strangely still,
Haunted by shadows of a vanished past
That came not back. And friends dropped one by one
Until the tomb held all to me of earth.
I walked the streets: and, lo, strange faces met
Me by the way; and I walked all alone,
As one by time forgot. And then—and then
Back to the silent home I turned and crept;
There in the hush of voiceless rooms to sit
With head bowed down upon clasped hands and dream,
And dream, and dream of long gone days. And I—
Oh, the heart sickness!—I—I could not die.
Sometimes I felt her arms about me, and the touch
Of loving fingers toying in my hair, and heard
The prattle of the babes upon my knee—and then
My hungry arms were empty, and the room
Only a haunted chamber.

And the street—
The crowd began to shrink in awe away
As though from one accursed. They turned and said,
“Some spell is on him. Lo, he cannot die!”
And children shunned me; and the mothers caught

A RACE TRAGEDY

Their babes away ; and fleeing from me said,
"He has the evil eye. Some curse or spell
Is resting on him, for he cannot die."
And even the priests about the sacred fane
Drew back, and with uplifted hands forbade the shrine,
And drove me thence, crying, "Some evil doom
Is resting on him. Lo, he cannot die!"
And in the darkness of the weird midnight
Strange faces leered at me, and laughed, and jibed
And, pointing skinny fingers, stared and cried,
"No tomb will hold him: even death itself
Has spued him out. No grave for him is made.
Kinless, alone, he walks the lonely earth,
And still must walk—for, lo, he cannot die."

.

I turned and fled
Out of the city gate, out to the tombs
Where dwelt the lepers ; but they cast me out.
Crying, "He cannot die! He cannot die!
Some curse is on him. Lo, he cannot die!
Our doom is better ; for he cannot die!"

And still the years rolled on. I saw the lines
Of Roman trenches close about the walls
Of Zion's city. Saw the battling hosts
That struggled in the daily widening breach.

A RACE TRAGEDY

I saw the falling towers: heard the crash
Of battering ram against the crumbling stone.
I saw the catapult with giant might
Hurling its missiles through the startled air.
And shout and oath of grappled men: the curse
Of dying thousands: while within the walls
Grim famine stalked, and women fought for bread
To feed their starving children, fought and died:
While Jew smote Jew in fratricidal strife
Until the streets ran red with brothers' blood.
And he foretold it: for he one time said
That not one stone of all great Zion's walls
Should rest upon its fellow—all cast down.
And then I hated him—I hated him,
Prophet of evil. Oh, I hated him
For Zion's doom foretold.

And yet—and yet,
When hanging on the cross, and howled the mob,
The ribald mob that swayed about his feet
Shouting their imprecations and their hate.
He did not hate. What was it came to him
That I have missed? Oh, will the passing years
Never again blot out that haunting look?
He only said, "Forgive!" and so he died.

.

A RACE TRAGEDY

I could not stay, though still the little house
Stood by the street: but home no more to me.
I could not stay: to me the home had died
With wife and children—Oh, my God, my God,
The awful hungering!

Across the lands
I turned and wandered, on, and ever on:
No east, no west, only the weary road,
And nightfall where the long, long day was done.
Sometimes I stood without the open doors
And saw the evening lamps, the ruddy glow
Of firesides where tired men sat down content,
Fondling their babes, while busy housewife made
The evening meal: sometimes my face was pressed
Against the casement, while with homesick heart
I watched clasped hands, and heard the murmured love;
And weak and faint I writhed in agony,
Homeless, alone; for home and love had died.

Wandering

Somehow a thought comes to me. How I live
Those old scenes over! I cannot forget.
And somehow still that man, the Nazarene,
Is ever present. If I shut my eyes,
I see him still. In vain I stop my ears;
His voice yet haunts me. Did he ever hate?
If only he had hated, only once!
Some act of bitterness, some unkind word,
Some harshness unforgiving, some quick speech:
Then I could soon forget; and so have rest.
But he—he only said, “Forgive!” and so he died.

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One day out on the hillside, past the gate,
I walked with Leah and the babes, too tired
With years of weary toil for daily bread
Even to think. The breath of early spring
Filled all the air with fragrance; and the bees
Hummed their low song. The quail piped in the wheat.
Great fleecy clouds passed floating overhead
White in the sunlight as the spotless snow
Of skyland Lebanon: the while the breeze
Brought far-off smell of terebinth and pine
And goodly woodland ways.

A RACE TRAGEDY

We sat awhile,
Glad for the rest from toil, and drinking in,
As famished souls, the pure, sweet springtime air.
An hour later, through the opened gates
An eager throng poured forth: and with them came
The Nazarene. It was the days before
We learned to hate him for the hope deferred
Of Israel's king come back to earth again
To drive the Roman from our lands, and save
Zion from trespass: days when still we dreamed
It might be He, the King, the promised King .

Sitting upon the grass, not far away,
The people gathered round him; for he spake
Words that were kind, and full of hope and cheer.
I watched the faces near him: some were sad,
Faces of those to whom life's ways were hard,
Faces in which the light of life had died,
Faces deep lined with anxious care, and tense
With all the strain of toil for daily bread.

A troubled pity came into his face
The while he watched them, such a look as comes,
May be, to God's face at his children's pain.
He had been teaching, telling kindly words
Of cheer and comfort, blessings, how they're won,
Warnings of sin; and then a simple prayer

A RACE TRAGEDY

To God, the Father, for the daily bread.
But as he watched the troubled, careworn look
Of anxious faces, for a while he ceased.
Then pointing to the birds that in and out
Circled and sang above them, glad for life,
And light, and sunshine, singing happy thanks
To God who made them,

“Lo, behold, he said,
God’s little ones: they sow not, neither reap,
Nor gather food in storehouse; yet your God,
He feedeth them. No anxious worry mars
Their little lives. They eat their daily food,
Nor question aught. And ye, oh, are not ye
Better than they?”

And stooping down he plucked
One of the springtime lilies from the grass,
Stroking its golden petals with a touch
As gentle as a mother’s light caress
With new born babe.

“Behold, behold, he said,
God’s golden lilies! Do they spin or weave?
And yet the king, the great king Solomon
In all his glory never was arrayed
As one of these, God’s lilies of the field,
That bloom today, and when the morning sun
Has come again, lo, hue and flower are not.
Why are ye anxious? If God feeds the birds

A RACE TRAGEDY

That sing and trust him, think ye he will not
Care for his children, and their daily food?
And if he clothes the lilies of the field
In hues no king can dream of, will not he
Think of his own, and see that they are clad?"

Oh, had he been a king, our promised king,
How I could love him for the gentle words,
And face so full of pity! But no crown,
Save that mock crown of jagged, blood stained thorns,
Was ever his. He said he was a king,
And was not—only, some vague, shadowy realm,
Some other world domain: and we, oh, we
Looked for the sword of David, and revenge,
And Rome thrust out: and so we hated him,
The king that was not king, nor brought relief.
And yet, and yet, oh, if it had been He!

The Camp of Attila

Ahasuerus

Thou man of blood, hast thou not shed enough
Of human gore? What fiendish thirst is thine,
That thus thou ragest through the troubled lands
Leaving behind thee only heaped up skulls,
And smoking homesteads? Is thy lust for blood
Unquenchable? Can no red fountain slake
The fire that burns thee? Can no crimson flood,
No poured out life tide, at its full, suffice?
Or must the lands still groan beneath thy feet,
And blood and slaughter blaze thy hideous trail?
Is there no pity in thy murderous heart?
Hath no compassion ever entered in?
Must earth still bear the horror of thy tread,
And nations die because that thou dost live?
What untold wrong was done thee, what of ill,
That thou can'st not forgive?

Strange! I saw one
Hanging upon a cross; his outstretched hands
Pierced by great spikes that held him; and a face
Tense in its agony, the while the mob
Surged at his feet, and howled, and cursed, and cried

A RACE TRAGEDY

Their imprecations on him. But no hate
Was in his face. He only bowed his head
In some great pity, bowed his head and died.
And he forgave.

Attila

Thou sad faced man, what is it in thy mien
Withholds my hand? No other of the breed,
This hated breed of men, dare speak me thus.
I fain would smite thee with my sword, or strike
Thee dead with spear; but some strange, unseen power
Holds back my hand. What spell of magic art
Is resting on thee, that I harm thee not?

And I?—I slay because I hate, I hate!
I hate this tiny race of men. I hate
Their puny ways—this breed of walled-in towns,
And towers, and ramparts, and of city gates,
Wherein men hide from foes they dare not meet
Out in the open. Oh, I hate, I hate
Their huckstering marts, their trading, chattering streets
Where men run to and fro as flies or ants
About some garbage heap. I hate, I hate
Their unclean ways, their foulness, and their sin.
Their homes betrayed, their bartered innocence;

A RACE TRAGEDY

And all for gold, for gold, for worthless gold.
Oh, for the untracked uplands, and the rush
Of storms that lash the great unending plains
That onward reach, and on, and on, and on
Till sky and earthlands meet! Oh, for a breath
Of wandering winds, lone winds that onward sweep
Unleashed, untamed, across broad leagues, and on,
Under the stars where night broods on the waste.
I come because I must, to burn and slay,
And smite this unclean breed of city folk.
I am the Scourge of God.

Ahasuerus

And yet, and yet
He had no hate. He only said, "Forgive!
Forgive them Father!" bowed his head, and died.

On!

A thousand years, and still I walk the lands.
And still the tombs grow thicker; and old earth
Only a charnel house—all tombs but mine:
Of all earth's people I alone have none.
No grave yawns for me; death has fled away:
No sea can drown; the arrow passes by:
Upon the battlefield I seek the end,
But, lo, the sword has dulled its edge for me:
And in the forefront of the deadly fight,
Where men fall as the trees before the blast,
Grim battlers pale at something in my face,
Something that others see, but I see not,
Some mark of God, may be, some fateful brand,
May be the mark that Cain bore, and as he—
That man of old—no man will strike or slay.
And even pestilence will touch me not;
For in the cities' slums where bald death stalks,
And men and babes drop as the stricken flies,
I dwell untouched. Death shuns me; and I walk
Deathless amid the dead. Of all earth's kin
I cannot die.

One day I sat beside
One who lay dying: and I watched the sweat,

A RACE TRAGEDY

That death dew falling just before the close
Of life's last night. It seemed as blessed dew
That falls on Lebanon's cedars: and the breath
That came in fitful gasps was as the sound
Of wandering breezes in the leafy trees—
For he could die, and dying be at rest.

I watched the eyes: and then there came a gleam
Of some strange light from far beyond the room
Wherein he lay, some curtain drawn aside
From unseen things. A glad smile touched the face
So wan and pallid. Did he see afar?
And was it wife and child? and was it home?
Some glad new life? And he, oh, he could die;
And dying enter in?

And then I knew,
Somehow I knew death as an opened door
Where through one passes to a life beyond.
But I—the door is shut: I cannot pass.
No death dew for my brow; no parting gasp:
Only life's long, long weary road; and then
Still the unending roadway, on, and on;
And feet so weary: but I may not pause.
“On! On! he said, On! On! and ever On,
Until I come again.”

A RACE TRAGEDY

But when, oh, when?
When art thou coming, Man of Galilee?
And when the doom be lifted? When? Oh, when?
My feet are weary of the long, long way;
And days that end not, and the years: and oh,
My heart is breaking in me for my dead!

.

Is it a dream, this scene that comes to me—
Or was it real? Or may be to me
Comes back that day when he, the Nazarene,
Paused at my door, and asked, and I refused.
Or did he ask? and did I thus refuse?
Sometimes the past grows hazy, and I scarce
Know dream from real. Is it mercy sent,
And love, and pity, and some tender ruth?
And am I growing old, that I forget?
At last, at last, am I, too, growing old?

But this I dreamed, or else I thought I dreamed,
Or else I lived it: for I grow confused
With all these endless years, and fading days
That come and go, nor scarcely leave a trace.
For days and years, and ages blend and fade
Into one past: and only I remain,
Wildered, adrift, to dream old dreams again.

A RACE TRAGEDY

I dreamed I came hard by a cottage door:
And all the land was blazing with the sun
Of summer noonday. Weak, and staggering,
I paused a moment: Then I made request—
I thirst with heat, and with the weary way.
A moment may I rest, and water crave?
For I am sore afaint.

And then he said,
The man who stood within the cottage door,
“What claim hast thou? Why should I wait on thee?
My days are heavy, and the dole of bread
Is hard to win: and all the weary hours
I work and toil. At night I cannot rest
For thought of morning, and the daily need,
And how to clothe these helpless little ones.
Why should I help thee? Go thy way, nor ask.
I know thee not.” And from the cottage door
He rudely thrust me.

Did I once do this?
Was my heart hard as his? and did I thrust
Him from my door, the sad faced Nazarene?
And yet the very stranger in the gate
Our old time Law made welcome; and forbade
That aught unkind or ill should come to him.

Elim

The evening shadows lengthen, and I come,
Weary and faint, to Ishmael's desert door,
And fain would crave the shelter of his tent.
Strange, how the ages reckon: I the son
Born of the promise; he the son cast out.
Hagar, thou art avenged. Thy son hath home,
And wife and child: and I the homeless one,
Walking alone though to the promise born.

And Ishmael's fate is kinder: he can claim
The desert as his home; and in its wastes
Find shelter from his foes: the endless reach
That on, and on, burns in the blazing sun;
The glowing sands; the far-off oasis,
Like Elim with its wells and waving palms,
Shut in by leagues on leagues of no-man's land;
The red simoon; the ever drifting dunes;
These are his refuge, these his age-long home.
And here the camp-fire; here the lonely night
Breathing its spirit in the winds that blow
From out the waste—a moment—and are gone
No man knows whither: and the silent stars
That watch in solemn concourse through the hours.

A RACE TRAGEDY

And Esau, he of Edom—how the years
Have righted wrong! Of first-born right bereft,
His hour of need made hour of right despoiled:
And by a brother, keenest pang of all.
The hand that should have been the first to help,
Reached out to wrong. And then the blessing gained
By subtle cunning: and that piteous cry,
“Hast thou no blessing still, my father? One—
One left for me, thy first born, only one:
I ask no more?”

Oh, how the years have brought
Stern retribution! Edom dwells secure
Amid his hills. The ages still have failed
To draw him thence, years, and the might of men.
For still the rocks are his, and upland plains,
And the lone stars of midnight, and the winds
That come and go, and voices of the night
That tell of freedom.

Lo, the promise was,
“Not thine the corn and wine; for thou shalt be
As one that serveth; but not long, for thou
Shalt break the bondage: then the desert dews
Shall wet thy tent. Thy sword shall be thy strength.”
The word was true; for Edom dwells apart,
Free as the hind that scales the mountain height,
His trail unmarked, his kin the wandering stars.

A RACE TRAGEDY

The covert of the rocks is his, and upland plains,
And far springs of the mountains, and lone nights
Under the stars. The ages come and go,
And no man hath dominion; for his sword
Is still his strength.

And outcast Ishmael,
Born of the slave, but with the royal blood
Of Abram's line thick in his tawny veins,
Outcast because not to the promise born,
He, too, lives on; and, lo, the desert winds
Have tanned his cheeks; the growl of far simoon
Finds echo in his speech; but by the palms
Of sand waste oases his goat skin tent
Makes home and country;

Still a wanderer;
And still an outcast; and with still his hands
Raised as an outlaw; yet the barren waste
Is home and country; and he still abides:
And armies pass him by; and conquerors
Turn back, nor dare the sands. It is his home.

And Israel, child of the royal line,
Heir of the promise, he a wanderer
In lands that are not his, no rest, no home,
Doomed of the ages, kinless, hopeless, lone;
Only the ghetto, and the pale; or worse,

A RACE TRAGEDY

The gilded liveness of his hoarded gold;
He is the outcast. Hagar is avenged,
And Esau, and the Nazarene—

But No!

No! No! He said forgive. He had no hate.
He voiced no cry for vengeance; only love
And some great pity filling all his soul:
He only said, Forgive! and so he died.

Ishmael, and Esau, and the Nazarene—
These are the haunting ghosts of Israel.

On Change

A rush of busy streets ; and to and fro
Men hurry, with drawn faces, strained, intent,
And eyes that have no rest ; the peace of God
Somehow forgotten. Heavy lines of care
Mar faces born as godlike. Stocks and bonds,
And dreams of gold uncounted, wealth untold :
Nor thought of cost—the soul life eaten up
In the fierce struggle.

Is it worth the price?
Have we forgot the words of one of old,
Spoken of Israel in the desert days
When men looked down, not up, nor thought of God,
“He gave them their request, the things they sought,
But to their souls sent leanness.” This the cost—
The price of lives turned to the baser things.

But, oh, the call, the far, sweet woodland call
Of winds that stir the needles of the pines
To faint, low music, singing still the song
Of Eden's days ; the cool, fresh gurgling plash
Of mountain brooks amid the moss grown stones ;
The bird notes in the trees ; the morning stars,
And all the heavens aglow with dawning light—
Are not these better ?

It is God himself
Calling us back—back to the saner things.

The Ghetto

The narrow streets—the unclean, sunless ways
Between dull walls—the gutters foul and dank—
The unswept garbage by low doors that lead
Back to the cheerless rooms that men call home—
Women bedraggled—children wan and old
Before their time, old with the pinched up face
Of want and penury, and lives despoiled
Of childhood's right to sunshine and to joy—
The dingy shops, filled with the cast-off things
Of Gentile lands—the keen eyed barterers
Hagling of pence—and everywhere the stamp
Of age-long degradation; God's clear light
Of cheer and hope shut out: the very air
Reeking with taint as with malodorous cry,
Unclean! Unclean!—and this is Israel!
This, by the side of Lebanon and its pines!
This, by the side of blue waved Galilee!
This, by the side of Zion, and its streets
Where walked the Jew in manhood, strong and free!

And still the ages come, the ages go:
And still the Ghetto; and within the pale,
As swine within a sty, the Jewish folk

A RACE TRAGEDY

Herded and pent, shut in by Gentile scorn.
Yet He was Israel's son, He in whose name
This hideous wrong is done; and He bade not.
Gentile and Jew alike were kin to him.
He had no hate: he only said, "Forgive,"
Where others hated: and the great, sweet love
Crowned all his life with kindness; and to him
Gentile and Jew were one. And yet the Jew
Hated him for this; and the Gentile world
Hates Israel's seed because they hated him.
But He—he hated none, he hated none.

And I, too, hate. Why cannot I forgive?
Is it the hate of one who does a wrong,
And, knowing this, pride will not let him bow,
And cry, "My fault I know; I sinned! I sinned!"

On—On—Still On!

The long, long years are drifting, one by one.
They melt into the ages, and are gone.
And age still adds to ages; and they, too,
Dawn to me and are not. The very hills,
Beaten by storms, melt down and pass away.
And I—I still go on: I still go on.
Amid earth's homes I wander, homeless—On!
And ever On! No fireside blaze for me.
Strange, how my life grows like his; for he, too,
Was homeless. When one came to him and said,
“Rabbi, where dwellest thou?” he made reply,
“Foxes have holes, the birds of air have nests,
But I—the Son of Man, hath not a place,
When night falls down, to lay his weary head.”

Is this my doom? And is it Israel's doom?—
Through all the years to live his life again;
Wanderers on earth, as he in Galilee;
Homeless as he was; cursed and spit upon;
For him the years, for us the centuries;
And then at last some new made Calvary?
Is this our expiation?

But he said,
“Forgive them, Father, for they do not know
The deed they do.”

A RACE TRAGEDY

And has the world forgot?
And has the Gentile stricken hands with Jew?
For now the cross is Juda's; and the hate
Is Gentile hate. They crucify the race
That crucified him, helpless. Oh, must he,
Across the years cry out that cry again,
That piteous cry that rang from Calvary,
But now for Gentile hands that smite and slay,
"Father, forgive; they know not what they do?"

.

But are the ages righting old-time wrongs?
Old wrongs still unatoned for, unavenged?
Is Israel blameless? Were we always kind
In our great day of power, when all the lands,
All peoples, looked to Salem in dumb hope?
Or were our hearts, too, hardened? Did we lift
The fallen by the wayside? Cheer the faint?
Give shelter to the homeless? Bread to those
Who hungered, and who had not? Were our hearts
Quick to the pain of others? Was all earth
Glad with our cheer and gladness?

Or did we
Forget the broader promise, those kind words
Spoken to Abram in old Haran days
Before the Land of Promise, when as yet
The Jew was not, and Salem's walls unbuilt,

A RACE TRAGEDY

And all men brothers, and forgetting this,
Live to ourselves alone, proud of our blood,
Scorning as lesser breeds the wildered folk
That stumbled in the dark, nor knew our God?
And yet to Abram was the promise given,
"Lo, in thy seed shall all the earth be blessed!"

Were we true to the mission? From our light
Did we give light? Or gave we from the fire
On our warm hearthstones to the cheerless homes
Of lands about us?

Or did we draw back,
Shut to ourselves, proud of our blood, our God,
And let the world go on its old-time way
In sin and darkness with no helpful hand,
No kindly cry of "Brother"? Oh, were we
The Pharisee of nations, wrapped in garb
Of our own holiness, the chosen race
Of all earth's myriads, nor caring aught
Who else might fall, so that we entered in?

.

I cannot put him from me, still he comes,
By day, by night, beneath the sun, or when
The blackest gloom of midnight closes down
To wrap me in. I shut my eyes, but still

A RACE TRAGEDY

That face is ever with me, and the eyes
Have still that look and still the gentle voice
Sends up that old, old prayer, that dying cry,
"Father, forgive! They know not what they do!"

Oh, if he had but hated! If the taunts,
The foul revilings, all the ribald speech,
Had brought reply; if taunt had come for taunt,
And bitter speech brought bitter speech again;
Then—then I could forget; and then that face
No more would haunt me; and that strange, sad voice
At last be stilled.

He only said, "Forgive!
Forgive them, Father!" bowed his head, and died.

Bethlehem

Last night I stood without an open door.
It was the night they say he saw the light
With infant eyes, in that strange borning place,
A stable manger—He, the Nazarene.
It was a church of those who follow him.
I stood half hid within a columned porch,
Weary and faint, heart hungry; and a cry
Of Leah! O my Leah! scarce held back.
For I could see within the open door
Glad faces, fathers, mothers, children, all;
And love, and light, and cheer—and I, O God!
I, too, had wife and child, my loved ones, mine;
But ages yawn between. Is there no word
Can tell me of them? Has the tomb no voice?
No sound comes ever from that dim unknown;
And I—I cannot die! I cannot die!
O God have pity. Grant to me a tomb.
I am so weary wandering. And, oh,
My heart is breaking in me for my dead!

I crouched behind the columns in the dark
That none might see; and moaned, and cried; and then

A RACE TRAGEDY

Out from the open door a burst of song
Swelled clear, and rang afar across the night.
It was the song they say the angels sang
That wondrous night, about the shepherds' camp
On old Judea's plain :—

When Jesus came to Bethlehem
In ages far away,
The angels sang the shepherd song
Before the break of day.

The morning stars looked down and heard
The song the angels sang ;
And through the arches of the skies
The mighty anthem rang.

They sang of God upon his throne,
His glory and his might ; ;
And loud and clear the angel song
Rang far across the night.

They sang of earth, the weary earth,
Weary of war and strife ;
They sang of peace, good will to men,
The kinder, better life.

A RACE TRAGEDY

They sang of brighter days to come,
Of hope, and love, and cheer ;
And ever as the song rang out
The dawning drew anear.

O earth. old earth, so torn and rent,
So filled with woe and tears,
Lift up thy face from out the dust !
The glad new day appears.

And then, somehow,
Within my heart there came a sudden thought,
A quick, strong yearning, and a bitter cry—
Did they not sing for us, that angel throng?
It was our land, our kin. Have we no share
In all this gladness? Shall all earth rejoice,
And we go cheerless? Shall the chosen blood
Disown its heritage, nor enter in?
Was he not Jew, and born of David's line—
This Babe of Bethlehem? this Nazarene,
Who answered not, but only prayed, "Forgive!
Forgive them, Father!" bowed his head and died?
Why do we give him up, O Israel's kin?
Why is he alien to old Juda's line?

A RACE TRAGEDY

And then a mighty struggle came to me ;
A struggle as of one bound fast with thongs.
Hate fought with pity. All the unyielding years
Of old-time prejudice, the sullen pride,
Swelled up within me in one last fierce burst :
Swelled up—and fought—and died.

His love at last—
Had turned the scale ; his love, and those last words,
“Father forgive!”

Mine! mine! my heart cried out.
Mine! mine! my country man, my blood!
Who?—What?—I know not. This I only know,
He said, Forgive!—and he was Juda’s blood,
Born of the House of David, Israel’s son ;
And mine the angel song ; and mine the cheer.
And as I sang that song within my heart,
A strange new hope came to me with a glow
And thrill of mighty gladness. All the hate
Of centuries was gone. Why should I hate
The one who hated not? His love at last,
His love had conquered—love, and that last cry,
“Father, forgive! they know not what they do!”

Rabboni

The years pass by, and still across the lands
I wander on. And still the long, long way!
And still when day is done, and night drops down,
I have no place to lay my weary head.
Sometimes, as Jacob on the Syrian plain,
Under the stars I lie, and watch the tread
Of ceaseless feet across the night-wrapped sky;
And it is Beth-El to the homeless years.
Sometimes a dusty couch beside the gate
Where restless throngs pass ever too and fro.
Sometimes, as that low hut at Bethany
Where he was welcome, some lone, humble home
Opens its doors to me—but that brings back
My home, my wife, my children, all the past
Of long dead centuries; and then I turn
Back to the stars again with hungry heart.
The stars are better, and the lonely way,
Until he come.

And yet the pain is gone,
That old, dull pain that rankled through the years.
And hate is gone. And I—I live his life,
His homeless life on earth, and I am glad;
Glad to be like him, him, the homeless One
Whom we cast out.

A RACE TRAGEDY

And now at last I know :

I—I am Israel. And, lo, the curse
Was not his curse, but Israel's curse of sin.
Is the doom lifting? Is the curse at last—
He called it sin—after the ages gone,
Has hope come back again?

Last night I saw

A gray hair streaked amid the raven black
That centuries had touched not. And I dreamed
Once more of wife and child. I felt her arms
Folded about me, and the gentle touch
Of her soft fingers in my hair. I heard
The prattle of the babes upon my knee.
Again I sat beside the open door
Within my shop, hard by the dusty way.
And once again he leaned the heavy cross
Against the wall. And once again that voice
In gentle pleading craved a moment's rest
On that hard road to Calvary. And, oh,
No hate was left within me. My whole heart
Went out in pity. In my dream I cried,
"Rabboni, Master, let me take thy cross
And bear it with thee. Who thou art, or whence,
Or why? I know not. But I only know
Thy love at last hath won me."

A RACE TRAGEDY

Then his face
No more was weary. All the look of pain
Faded away. The eyes were lifted up
As one who looks beyond the far-off skies,
And on, and on, into the very eyes
Of God himself.

And then a gentle voice,
"Father, I thank thee! Oh, at last, at last,
My brother is my brother once again."

And he shall come: but it can only be
After the years; when Israel's heart of hate
Has learned to pity; then at last to love.
He, too, was Jew. Why should the Gentiles claim
Him as their own? And why should we, the Jew,
Turn from him and disown? He said he came
To the lost sheep of Juda.

And that wail,
That piteous wail o'er Salem's headstrong race,
"How oft I would have gathered you, and kept,
Even as a hen her restive, straying brood
Beneath the shelter of her outstretched wings:
But, lo, ye would not. And behold your house
Is left unto you lone, and desolate."
And that last cry that rings across the lands,
Filled with the old-time love for Israel,
"Father, forgive! they know not what they do!"

A RACE TRAGEDY

Lo, he shall come unto his own once more.
The age-long wandering shall cease; for then
Gentile and Jew shall know their common kin;
And through his love they twain be one again.

.

And he, that man of blue-skied Galilee,
Friend of the fisher folk, so strangely wise
In things unworldly, he that walked the earth
Homeless and lone, yet ever with a face
So filled with love that children turned to see,
And clung about him, he of kindly speech
To erring outcasts, with no word of sting,
Only commanding, "Go, and sin no more!"—
Has either understood him? Have not we,
Old Israel's sons, forgot the prophet's speech
Of years long gone, when looking on he said,
On past the years, within the ages dim,
In that weird vision seen of One to come,
Helper to Israel, himself unhelped:—

"A man of men rejected, scorned, despised,
Broken with sorrow, sorrows not his own,
Wounded for our transgressions, and the price
Of peace for others paid by him alone."

A RACE TRAGEDY

Was this the one he spake of? And did we,
Made blind by hate because of dreams unfilled,
Fail to discern him in that sad-faced man
Who died on Calvary, and hated not?

And other men, with cross and Calvary,
And then the ages long of strife and hate,
Have they mistaken also? Have they seen
Only a king, and words of men's behest,
And creeds unlivable, unthinkable,
And God unthroned to make a place for one
Who looking upward to that face benign
Of Him, the one All-Father—Him alone—
Had humbly cried, as one of human kind,
My God and Father, help and comfort me!
Have these men failed to know him? and have they
Looked for a God, and failed to see the Man,
The man the prophet spake of, one who died
Despised, rejected; but who hated not?

Was this the grander vision? And did they,
Looking beyond, fall short, and know him not?

Dreams

Sometimes a vision comes to me, a dream
Such as men dream when walking on their feet,
Yet seeing, hearing not.

Once more I walk
In Salem's streets. A temple vast uprears
Its columned porticos. Its walls reach down
To Zion's rock foundations; and the dome
Clean-cut against the skies of Syria stands.
And through its gates a countless multitude
Is entering in. From all the lands they come,
Gentile and Jew. The ghetto sends its throngs,
But now no longer cowed and base with fear.
The scattered synagogues; the wanderers
Of Israel's blood; and by their side the kin
From desert lands where Ishmael tents afar.
And men from Christian lands, whose cross-decked fanes
Send out their streams: and from the far-off isles
Where purple seas break on the coral strand;
And lands unknown, beyond the unknown seas.
And from the throng I hear a murmured speech
Of God—Jehovah—Allah—Brahm—and Buddh—
As sound of many waters.

But within
Upon that lofty dome one name is writ,

A RACE TRAGEDY

Only one name: and in a mighty joy
All men bow down, and all lips voice that name,
"All-Father"—for all men at last have found,
Whate'er the names the world has known him by,
He yet is one—one God alike to all—
All men his children: and on earth at last,
This weary, sin-cursed earth of wrangling creeds,
All-Father's Love, and Brotherhood of Man.

.

The work is done. The long, long weary years
Draw near their close: and back to man again,
The source from whence he came, may Israel turn
And with clasped hands say, "Brother! Brother mine!"
It is the broader vision. That old ban
Of Jew and Gentile hate here fades away,
And all are brethren. And above them all,
Gentile and Jew, and men of every kin,
Only the kindly face, the pitying smile
Of Him, All-Father: and the loving voice
Saying, "My children—mine—my children all!"

Is it a dream, only a glad, sweet dream?
Or may it be?—and one God over all.

Let Us Go Back

O Israel, my brothers, wanderers,
Scattered and lost, and aliens in the lands
That are not home, sold to the greed of gain,
Turn back the years and live the past again.
For Israel is not dead; the better self
Nor age, nor pain, nor wrong could ever kill.
The soul still lives, though lean and starved it be.
Turn back to life and manhood's hope once more:
Back from the slums, the ghetto, and the days
Sordid and mean, the ways unworthy—all
That mars and soils and drags us ever down:
Back from the money changing, and the gold—
It is the wedge of Achan. Better far
The death beyond the camp, than soul death. Back—
Back to the nobler life, the saner ways!
Back to the hills, and Jacob's old-time God!

For, oh, the night winds still are sweet, so sweet,
That breathe from Lebanon's pines across the land:

A RACE TRAGEDY

And still the rose of Sharon, as of old,
Fills all the vale with fragrance: still the rills
Gurgle amid the stones beneath the shade
Of arching willows; and the pendent boughs
Trail in the waters, swaying to and fro.
And still the leaves are russet on the vines,
Sun-kissed and glowing: and, as long ago,
The waves are blue on hill-walled Galilee.
The land still waits for Jacob's sons once more,
And laughing children, and the dulcet notes
Of pipe and tabor in the village streets,
And sounds of greeting at the cottage door.

Let us go back; we have no other home.
And still Machpelah's cave awaits our dead.

Leah

I hear the voice of Leah calling me.
Not from the past—somewhere away beyond,
And calling back. She sings that old, old song
Sung in the days of Israel's glory, sung
From love to love, from heart to heart again;
One of the old love chants of Israel:—

“Rise up my Love, my Fair One! Come to me!
Come Love, oh come away!
For, lo, the winter with its chill is fled.
The rains are past and gone.
The blossom buds are bursting in this land.
It is the time of bird songs come again.
The turtle doves coo low their nesting song.
The fig tree putteth forth her new green figs.
The vineyard grapes give out a goodly smell.
Rise up my Love, my Fair One! Come to me!
Come to me, Love!
Come Love! Oh come away!”

SHALOM

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